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AUTHOR Fox, Robert A.; And Others
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Thirty-three undergraduate students volunteered for a minimum of 20 hours in agencies serving the developmentally disabled (DD) as part of the requirements for a course on exceptional children; 10 additional students chose to complete a paper. A 40-item questionnaire pertaining to attitudes towards the DD population was administered prior to and following the volunteer experience. Significant attitudinal changes in a negative direction were found in both groups indicating a more realistic perspective towards the DD population. Students were strongly in favor of integrating the DD individual in the community but were more mixed regarding the same issue in the schools. Students overwhelmingly supported including a volunteer experience as part of a course on exceptionality. (Author/CL)

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Undergraduate Attitudes Towards the Developmentally Disabled: Impact of Volunteering

Robert A. Fox Wanda Lopuch
Marquette University

Anthony Rotatori
University of New Orleans

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Please address correspondence to:

Robert Fox, Ph.D.
Marquette University
School of Education
Schroeder Complex
Milwaukee, WI 53233

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Undergraduate Attitudes Towards the Developmentally Disabled:

Impact of Volunteering

ABSTRACT

Thirty-three undergraduate students volunteered for a minimum of 20 hours in agencies serving the developmentally disabled (DD) as part of the requirements for a course on exceptional children; ten additional students chose to complete a paper. A 40 item questionnaire pertaining to attitudes towards the DD population was administered prior to and following the volunteer experience. Significant attitudinal changes were found indicating a more realistic perspective towards DD. Students were in strong favor of integrating the DD individual in the community but were more mixed regarding the same issue in the schools. Students overwhelmingly supported including a volunteer experience as part of a course on exceptionality.

Undergraduate Attitudes Towards the Developmentally Disabled: Impact of Volunteering

Most universities offer a course on the psychology and education of the developmentally disabled (DD). Some instructors add a volunteer experience to the course to provide direct contact with DD people. The impact of these dydactic and volunteer experiences on student attitudes towards the DD has been minimally reported in the literature (e.g., Stainback & Stainback, 1982). With the recent emphasis on mainstreaming efforts, enhancing the impact of these courses and experiences for future teachers and other human service professionals may help promote the fostering of an open and positive attitude toward DD persons. One recent study (Fox, Lopuch, & Fisher, 1984) found that students reported being more comfortable with DD individuals and felt a positive change in their perceptions regarding this population following a volunteer experience. The present study extended this investigation by looking at more complex attitudinal measures with undergraduates before and after volunteering.

PROCEDURE

Students and Settings

Forty-three undergraduates, five males and 38 females, enrolled in an introductory course on exceptional children. The majority of students were education majors (N = 29) and at the sophomore or junior levels (N = 35). Most of the students (N = 33) reported having minimal or no previous experience with the developmentally disabled (DD).

Students were given the option of doing at least 20 hours of volunteer work in a DD setting or completing a term paper; 33 chose volunteering and 10 chose a paper.

Students were given a choice of settings in which to volunteer. Some students worked as teaching assistants in classrooms for mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed and learning disabled children and adolescents. A number of students functioned as tutors for DD adults in educational and vocational areas. Sheltered workshops also served as volunteer sites. The remaining settings served very young DD children. One group of students worked as babysitters for families with DD children. Two agencies that provided early intervention programming attracted the majority of students. These students performed a variety of tasks including the provision of basic care to the children, implementing educational objectives (e.g., developing self-care skills), playing with the children during free periods and others.

Questionnaire

During the first week of classes, all 43 students completed a 40 item attitudinal questionnaire, adapted from Gottlieb & Corman (1975), pertaining to the DD population. Gottlieb & Corman (1975) completed a factor analysis of their questionnaire. Three of the four factors they derived were included in the present study. Our questionnaire included 19 semantic differential items. Examples of item pairs were dangerous-safe, sad-happy, cruel-kind, etc. Students rated these item pairs using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 always associated with a negative attribute (e.g., weak) and 7 associated with the

corresponding positive attribute (e.g., strong); students marked 4 if they felt the item was irrelevant. The semantic differential items corresponded with a "Positive Stereotype" factor as derived by Gottlieb & Corman (1975). Ten narrative items were chosen that loaded on a "Community Segregation" factor (e.g., "A parent should allow his 'normal' child to play with a DD child"). Twelve additional items represented a "Classroom Segregation" factor (e.g., "The presence of a DD child in a regular class impedes the educational progress of the child's normal peers"). Students rated these items using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, 4 = irrelevant). One item loaded on both the Community and Classroom Segregation factors and was scored independently with each factor. Near the end of the semester students again completed the 40 item questionnaire and some additional items concerning the volunteer experience (e.g., "Rate the helpfullness of the supervision").

RESULTS

Using three factors derived by Gottlieb & Corman (1975) for the questionnaire items, separate multiple analyses of variance with repeated measures were used to determine pre-post changes for each factor (i.e., Positive Stereotype; Community Segregation; Classroom Segregation) by student sex, age, major, paper/volunteer option, and previous DD experience. From these analyses, two significant findings emerged. First, students significantly changed

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their ratings on the "Positive Stereotype" factor items (F (1,40) = 4.03 $p < .05$) from pre- to post-testing. For these 19 semantic differential items on the questionnaire, the students' mean pretest score was 3.44 (SD = 1.27) and the mean post-test score was 3.27 (SD = 1.48). Secondly, students with at least some previous experience with DD persons scored higher (F (1,40) = 4.52, $p < .04$) on the positive stereotype factor ($\bar{X}$ = 3.52, SD = 1.4) than did students without this experience ($\bar{X}$ = 3.18, SD = 1.4). None of the pre-post analyses for the remaining factors or student variables (e.g., age, sex) achieved significance. Given no significant pre-post differences on the Community and Classroom Segregation factors, percentage of student responses to each item comprising the Community Segregation and the Classroom Segregation factors are shown in Table I for the post-test findings only.

Insert Table I about here

Inspection of Table I reveals that students tended to have very positive attitudes regarding the community integration of the DD population. For example, 92.8% felt that a parent should allow their "normal" child to play with a DD child. Averaging the percentages of students' responses for each of the 10 items on the Community Segregation factor revealed that 92% of the students favored community integration (item ratings of 5, 6, 7). Students' attitudes were more mixed regarding integrating the DD child in

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regular school classes (e.g., 25.6% felt that the special class placement was best, 39.5% disagreed, and 34.9% were undecided). Most students (88.3%) felt that normal children could benefit from having DD children in the regular classroom. The majority of students also indicated that DD students would not impede the education progress (65.1%) nor contribute to negative behavior patterns (76.7%) of normal children.

For students choosing the volunteer option, the majority felt that their respective settings had positive atmospheres (78.1%), provided a well-organized experience (84.3%) and good supervision (81.3%). Prior to volunteering, students gave an overall mean attitude rating of 3.59 (SD = 1.2) towards handicapped persons (using a scale from 1 - very negative to 7 - very positive). Following volunteering, the students' mean rating on this item increased to 5.09 (SD = 1.0). Further, 93% of students volunteering were interested in more volunteer work in the future.

DISCUSSION

Students involved in the present study significantly changed their attitudes towards DD individuals on the Positive Stereotype factor. This change was not related to students characteristics (e.g., age, sex) nor did it discriminate those who volunteered from those who did not. Of interest was that this significant change was in the negative direction. Within the context of the other findings of this study, this negative trend is felt to represent a more

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realistic appraisal of the DD by students rather than a worsening attitude set. Most of the students had very minimal, if any, prior exposure or information regarding the DD population. As noted on the high positive ratings for the Community Segregation factor, students tended to maintain somewhat idealistic notions regarding the community integration issue. The more obvious integration items on the Classroom Segregation factor also lead to very positive ratings. Those items receiving more mixed ratings appeared to reflect a basic lack of information combined with a genuine concern for what is best for the DD child versus a segregational attitude (e.g., students were unsure if the special education class was ultimately the best placement for the child). The above findings are consistent with those of Gottlieb & Corman (1975) who reported that, "younger people tended to reject the generalized positive stereotype, while at the same time they opposed segregation of retarded children in and outside of school" (p. 75).

Those students who did volunteer work did not differ on their questionnaire ratings from those who did papers. This finding appears related to the nature of the questionnaire. It did not detect the benefits that volunteer work was expected to engender. However, these benefits were observed through two data sources. First, students rated their post-volunteer attitude towards handicapped persons as higher ($\bar{X}$ = 5.09) than their pre-volunteer attitudes ($\bar{X}$ = 3.09; rating scale - 1 = very negative, 7 = very positive). Secondly, each student completed a volunteer report following their experiences.

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A number of their comments that follow illustrate the positive impact of the volunteer experience..."It (volunteering) made me realize that I don't have to be afraid of people who are different"..."I learned that mentally retarded people are just as capable of learning as anyone"..."Although I learned a lot of facts and ideas about these exceptional children in class, this volunteer experience helped me to understand these children better than any lecture or textbook ever could"..."One of the most important things I learned is the importance of mainstreaming learning disabled children"..."Labels are unimportant because they alone do not suggest a teaching plan"..."I learned patience very quickly." These comments and numerous others like them demonstrate the value of volunteering. Clearly new instruments need to be developed to measure the changes that are occurring. Also the long term impact of such experiences on future attitudes and behavior towards DD persons needs investigation. At present, providing a course on exceptionality supplemented with a direct exposure does appear to have a positive impact for students.

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TABLE I

Percentage of Student Responses (N = 43 students)
to Post-test Questionnaires

	Disagree (Responses 1-3)	Irrelevant (Response 4)	Agree (Responses 5-7)
I. Factor 1 - Community Segregation			
1. A parent should allow his "normal" child to play with a DD child.	4.8	2.4	92.8
2. DD children have a right to a public education.	4.7	---	95.3
3. I would not want my child to attend a school that also had a class for DD children.	100.0	---	---
4. A DD child should not expect to participate in teenage activities available in the community.	97.7	2.3	---
5. A DD child living in my neighborhood would tend to lower the value of my property.	97.7	2.3	---
6. Programs for DD children are too expensive in relation to what the DD child gains from them.	88.4	4.7	7.0
7. Most parents of a DD child can have other, "normal" children.	4.7	2.3	93.0
8.* Self-contained special classes are justified for some DD children.	4.7	2.3	93.0
9.* DD children should not attend public schools with normal children but should go to special schools where "normal" children do not attend.	86.0	7.0	7.0
10.* You can usually tell a DD child (by his appearance/ by how he looks).	76.7	11.6	9.3
II. Factor 2 - Classroom Segregation			
1. The special class is the best way of educating the DD child.	39.5	34.9	25.6
2. DD children would learn more if they were integrated into regular classes.	22.3	37.2	39.5
3. "Normal" children also benefit when DD children are integrated into regular classes.	4.7	7.0	88.3
4. The DD child will feel inadequate in the normal classroom.	44.2	23.3	32.5
5. The presence of a DD child in a regular class impedes the educational progress of the child's normal peers.	65.1	14.0	21.0
6. Integration of the DD child into regular classes will improve the child's acceptance by his or her "normal peers."	4.7	7.0	88.3
7.* DD children should not attend public schools with normal children but should go to special schools where "normal" children do not attend.	86.0	7.0	7.0
8. Integrating mentally retarded children into regular classes would probably contribute to negative behavior patterns on the part of the "normal" children.	76.7	7.0	16.3
9. DD children are more likely to be discipline problems in regular classes than in special classes.	51.2	18.6	30.2
10. The transfer of DD children to regular classes creates no major problems other than the need for resource teachers.	67.4	11.6	21.0
11. Labeling the DD child encourages isolation from his or her "normal" peers.	9.3	9.3	81.4
12.* DD children may reach their potential but will never be able to function on the level of their "normal" age or grade peers.	48.8	18.6	32.6

* These items were found to load on more than one factor according to Gottlieb & Corman (1975).

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